

THE MYSTERY OF THE PAINTED ROCKS

Emma remembers the last hike she went on with Mama. It was a beautiful day outside: the sun was shining, there were birds singing, and Mama held Emma by the hand to help her over some big rocks on the ground. Emma sees a butterfly off in the distance, and Mama stops her from following it.

"Why, Mama?" asked Emma, "It's so pretty!"

"Because, my little heart, the butterfly is off the trail and you could get hurt."

The two finally reached the peak: an overlook of a cool, clear lake. Emma gasped in delight, and covered her eyes at the bright light of the sun reflecting off of the lake. Mama reaches into her backpack and gives a small pair of pink sunglasses to Emma, Emma's favorite pair. She has many sunglasses, but these pink ones shaped like hearts look just like the ones Mama has, and that's why they're her favorite

Little Emma, at five years old, loves going on hikes with

Mama. They get to explore, and Mama gets to tell her everything about nature. Emma loves learning about nature, especially when Mama tells her about the animals, and plants, and she gets to see things like this: a beautiful lake on a beautiful day, forest surrounding them as the eye can see.

Mama then unpacks a picnic - a blanket, bottles of water and apple juice, and a PB&J sandwich. Mama's sandwich has tuna in it...yuck. The two sit down and Emma watches the lake in wonder, shouting for joy every time a fish jumps out of the lake.

Suddenly, Mama takes Emma's hand. Emma looks over to Mama, and her smile disappears when she sees that Mama isn't smiling.

"Emma," Mama began, "Mama has to tell you something." She pauses as if unsure of what to say, then continues. "I...have to go away for a while." Emma gasped.

"What?"

"Something bad is happening, my little heart. There's a really bad sickness. Do you remember when you had the chicken pox? And I had to take care of you?" Emma nods. "Well, there's a really bad chicken pox. And a lot of people are getting sick."

"Are you sick, Mama?"

"No, my angel, I am not. But I am going to help these sick people get better. I'm going to take care of them like I took care of you when you were sick."

"When will you be back?" Mama takes Emma's face in

her hands, small tears pricking her beautiful dark eyes.

"Sooner than you know, my little one."

The picnic ended soon after that, and on the way back down, Emma and Mama took to their special tradition of picking the two most beautiful rocks on the trail. Emma's was so big that she had to use two hands to carry it. Mama's was smaller, but it was a really pretty color: some kind of gray-ish blue. It's almost a shame that they're going to paint it. Almost.

That was the last hike Emma went on with Mama. Mama left two days later: she packed her bags with her funny equipment and special clothes that she wears to work, and Emma and Papa stand at the door as she carries her bag with her out the door.

"Do you have your scrubs?" Papa asked. "Your stethoscope? Your masks? Hand sanitizer?"

"Yes, yes, yes, and yes," Mama answered.

"Have you checked?"

"I've checked five times."

"Wait, Mama, Mama!" Emma cried.

"Yes, my angel?"

"If you're taking care of the sick people, who's taking care of you?" Mama gives a small laugh and crouches down to Emma.

"I'll be just fine, my little heart." Suddenly, Emma races off, determination in her step. Mama and Papa don't have time to react when Emma comes rushing back with the rock she

picked up from the hike the other day. On it Emma painted rainbow colors, from red to orange to green, with a stick figure of a woman with long hair on it. There's also a cross next to it, crudely drawn but still recognizable.

"Here, take La Virgen de Guadalupe so she can take care of you!"

Tears rush back to Mama's eyes, and she gently receives the rock, placing her in her suitcase.

"Thank you, my angel."

With that, and after giving Papa a tender goodbye kiss, Mama gets into her car and drives away. Emma looks up at Papa, and sees tears in his eyes, takes him by the hand. Papa doesn't even have the time to react when Emma pulls him back inside the house. Quickly, Emma leads Papa to the rock painting station that she and Mama share: a small pink plastic table with matching chairs to go with it. The paint hasn't been cleaned up since Emma painted her version of La Virgen de Guadalupe, so it's still kind of all over the place. There are also a few rocks on the table: unpainted and ready to receive the imagination of a five year old.

"Come paint with me, Papa!" Emma said happily, "We'll paint all the rocks and show them to Mama when she gets back!" But Papa shakes his head.

"I'm sorry, princess, but Papa can't. Papa has to work." At seeing Emma's fallen face, Papa crouches down to her

height. "Do you want to help Papa with his work?"

Emma nods enthusiastically. She's never helped Papa with his work before. This could be fun! But as Papa takes her away, Emma looks back at the rock painting table, empty and unused.

And so a new pattern begins in the Cervantes household. Emma wakes up Papa in his room, they have breakfast together, and then Emma plays a game of helping Papa with putting different things in different places. It's not as fun as rock painting, but it's exciting when they're done and Papa rewards Emma with her favorite peanut candy. Sometimes, Papa will be reading something, burst out with laughter and say something in Spanish that's too fast for Emma to understand, and then gives her the paper to color with.

Emma doesn't understand the writing on the paper anyway, so she takes out her crayons and colors.

One morning, however, something was off. Emma couldn't quite place it at first. Everything was perfectly normal at first: wake up Papa in his bed and go down to breakfast. But at her place at the table, Emma gasps. Sitting at her place was a little rock: light blue, with a little white flower carefully drawn on it.

"Papa, papa, look!" Emma cried, holding the rock out to him. He gasps in surprise as well.

"Well, where did that come from? Did you paint that, princess?"

"No! Did you, Papa?"

"No, it wasn't me." Emma gasps again, her little brown eyes widened.

"Was it Mama? Is she home?" Before Papa could say a word, Emma races back through the house, calling for Mama. To her dismay and confusion, there is no response.

"Perhaps it is a fairy sent by your Mama," Papa said. "Come along, I've got plenty of papers for you to color."

But it turned out that Emma couldn't really color those either. She looks at the paper that Papa gives to her.

$$2+2= \underline{\quad\quad}$$

$$2+4= \underline{\quad\quad}$$

$$1+3= \underline{\quad\quad}$$

"Papa?" Emma asked, confused, "What is this?"

"Oh, well, let's see." Papa takes the paper and studies it carefully. "Oh, it seems that that fairy has left some math for you to do. You remember math, right, princess?" Emma nods. Papa takes her crayons and lays them out carefully in front of her: two crayons in one pile and two crayons in another.

"Okay, princess, count how many crayons there are."

They continued like this: Papa laying out crayons and Emma counting them. It got boring very quickly.

"But Papaaaa I want to color!"

"I know, I know. After this one, we'll color. Okay?"

"Can we color rocks?"

"Paper, princess."

"Oh."

The next day was similar too. A new rock, this one green with a heart drawn on it, followed by math. After the third or fourth day (it's hard to keep count), Emma has had enough. There are more new rocks left by this supposed fairy that she's never seen, and the math is boring.

"Papa?" Emma asked sweetly one morning, setting aside a newly painted yellow rock, "Can I play with my friends today?"

But Papa shakes his head.

"I'm sorry, Princess, but the sickness is outside. You could get sick."

"But it's like the chicken pox. I'll get better."

"But I don't want you to get sick. And neither does your Mama. We need to stay inside."

"But I want to go outside!"

"I said no, Emma."

"Papa! I want to go now!"

"Emma Isabella Cervantes, I said no!"

Emma gasps. Papa only uses her name when she's in trouble.

But what did she do? Tears prick her eyes, and Papa heaves a sigh of defeat.

"Let's take a break from math, okay? Papa has some coloring pages for you."

And so Emma never asked to go outside again. At least she had the mystery of the painted rocks to keep her occupied. The more that Emma thought about it, the more she realized that she has to investigate this entirely serious matter. For one, if it's not the fairy, then who is it? Is Mama coming home to paint rocks just to leave again? If so why would she leave? If, however, it is the fairy, then how can Emma see her? Could Emma possibly talk to her? Just to see if she really was sent by Mama? Emma's nothing if not curious.

So, Emma made the official executive decision to stay up late. Since the rocks only show up in the morning, it makes sense that the fairy comes in every night. After Papa tucked her in to bed, Emma waited until the lights of the hallway went out before crawling back out of bed. Sly, stealthy, like a spy, Emma slowly opens her bedroom door. She creeps out of the room, and into the hallway where she sees a little light far away. Not even thinking twice, Emma races over to where the light is shining from. She can tell exactly where it's coming from: the living room, and her rock painting station.

To her surprise and shock, Emma doesn't see a fairy. Or Mama.

"Papa?"

Papa looks up from the table, rock in one hand, and a paintbrush with pink paint in the other.

"Princess, what are you doing awake? It's late."

"Why are you painting the rock, Papa?" Papa looked over at the rock and gently set it and the paintbrush down.

"What about the fairy? What about Mama?" Papa winced a little.

"I'm so sorry, Princess, I- I told you that to make you happy. I wanted you to have something to smile about."

"Then it was you? But you don't like painting rocks."

"No, no, Princess, I love painting rocks. But it was always something special with you and your Mama. I didn't want to get in the way of that."

"So it really was you?"

"I- yes, Princess."

"No fairy."

Papa shakes his head no.

"No Mama."

Papa again shakes his head no.

Emma didn't know how to feel really. On one hand, there's no fairy. Or Mama. Papa was right, rock painting is their tradition. Papa never really seemed interested in doing it. But then again, Emma always wanted to paint with Papa, so...

Emma goes over to Papa, sitting at the little table, climbs over his awkwardly placed long legs, and squeezes him around his

chest as tight as she can. Papa reciprocates the hug happily.

"Can I paint with you, Papa?"

"Of course you can, if it doesn't get in the way with Mama."

"I don't know what that means, Papa." Papa gives a small chuckle.

"No, you wouldn't. Ah, well. You'll get it when you're older. Can you forgive me for lying?"

"Yes, Papa."

"I love you, princess."

"I love you too, Papa."

The next day, Papa's phone rang.

Emma was coloring more pages, taking a break from math, when both heard the telltale ringtone. Papa stands off of the floor, and picks up the phone from his desk. Stretching out his legs after sitting on the floor, Papa leaves the room for a moment, and begins speaking, closing the door behind him.

Emma, curious as always, stands as well. She goes to the door, putting her ear up against it to see if she could hear anything. Fortunately, the door isn't very thick, and Emma can hear her father's voice, although a little muffled.

"Yes...yes...I see...thank you."

Emma doesn't step out of the way of the door fast enough, and when Papa opens the door, it hits her right on the nose. Crying, Emma is taken to the kitchen where the bandaids are and

Papa takes care of her, his face low and sullen. After five peanut candies and ice on her nose, Emma begins to feel a little better and asks Papa who called on the phone.

"It's your Mama, Princess. She...got the chicken pox." Emma gasped.

"She's sick?! But she had La Virgen de Guadalupe!"

"Sometimes, Princess, bad things happen even with La Virgen de Guadalupe."

"Does this mean she's coming home?"

"Well,-"

"Let's paint all the rocks for her!"

Without another word, Emma drags Papa over to the rock painting station and they spend the rest of the day painting rocks. And when they ran out of rocks, they went to the backyard and picked up more. At least, Papa did. Emma is too scared to go outside now.

Papa finally called it off after the sun went down, and to Emma they must have painted over two million rocks. Papa counted fifty. Close enough. Emma then goes around the house and lays the rocks everywhere: on Mama's pillow, in the kitchen, in the living room, and even in Emma's own room. Papa helps her as well, but he still remains quiet, watching Emma run around with a sad smile.

"Papa?" Emma asked when she finished. "When's Mama coming home?"

"Soon, princess. I hope."

"Don't worry Papa, she'll be back before you know it!
That's what she told me!"

Papa doesn't disagree.

The next morning was clear. Beautiful. The sun had just risen to say "Good morning," and the birds were singing joyfully from their nests: bringing home delicious worms for breakfast to give to their little ones. After finishing her breakfast, Emma went to go stand at the front door again when Papa's phone rang again. He picked it up, and after some talking, Papa sets the phone down. Emma turns to see Papa slumping over in his chair, his head in his hands. Emma rushes over to him.

"Papa, was that Mama? What did she say?"

Papa doesn't say anything. Instead, Emma hears sobbing. He then squeezes her into a hug of his own, and Emma looks to the front door.

"Is she coming home?"

Papa doesn't answer, still sobbing. Emma is confused to say the least. She's never seen Papa cry before. Finally, Papa speaks.

"I'm so sorry, Princess, but she's not coming home.
She's with La Virgen now."

What? No, that can't be right. This is like the chicken pox, Mama should have gotten better. This doesn't make any sense.

"But...why? Why would she be with La Virgen? Doesn't she love us? Isn't she going to come back?"

Papa starts to wipe away his tears as Emma begins to cry.

"She should get better! She should come back! I want to see my Mama!"

Papa holds Emma close, and lets her tears fall.

A week went by, but to Emma, it feels like time doesn't exist anymore. There was a terrible storm outside during Mama's funeral, almost to the point where they had to wait before burying her. Emma looked up at Papa, his face covered with a black mask over his nose and mouth. Emma has the same mask over her own face, but pink. Pink was Mama's favorite color.

At least Emma got to see her grandparents and cousins and aunts and uncles. Mama came from a big family and, although not all of them could be there in person, Emma got to say hi to them all over the phone or see them in Papa's phone.

Emma's also officially decided that she hates funerals.

Mama's funeral was long, and sad, and took forever. And Emma wanted to climb into the casket with Mama one last time, but Papa told her not to. So, Emma left her rock of La Virgen de Guadalupe in the casket so that Mama would have Her with her.

There was a small gathering of a few people after the body was finally buried, and one of Mama's friends, someone Emma had never met or seen before in her life, was trying to strike up a conversation with Papa, but he didn't have a mask on.

"Where's your mask, mister?" Emma asked suddenly. The room got very quiet, so quiet you could hear a pin drop. Emma looked around to see curious faces of the other people. Some of them had masks on, some of them don't.

"Well, little missy," The man responded, looming over her like the tallest tree, "Some people can't breathe very good without a mask on. I just like being able to breathe. And for the record, your daddy should teach you not to interrupt somebody when they're talking." Before Emma could respond, the man continued, "I am a Christian, which means that I get to breathe in the breath of God, and no man, woman, or stupid kid is going to take that away from me and ask me why I'm not wearing a mask." Before Emma could respond, Papa stepped in between them, forcing the man to step away from Emma.

"Really, Max? You're at Stephanie's funeral telling my daughter that you need to breathe God's air? And you're standing way too close. Didn't your mother teach you about personal space?"

"Aw, come on, Josh. I'm not sick. This whole thing is fear-mongering anyway. I would think you of all people would be able to see that."

"You call this fear-mongering? It's a face mask. You're healthy enough to wear one and still breathe God's air. What makes you think it's a good idea to come to Stephanie's funeral and not wear a mask? She's dead because of people like

you."

"Well I'm sure Stephanie was wearing a mask too, and look where it got her."

Emma shrieked with fright as she saw Papa's fist collide with the stranger's cheek. People came rushing in between the two men, and someone stood in front of Emma, shielding her from seeing whatever else was going on. One of the people without a mask on escorted the stranger out of the room, while people who were wearing masks provided Papa with some wipes and hand sanitizer.

The drive home from the funeral (and the punching) is much too quiet. Suddenly, Papa pulls off the side of the road, and turns to Emma in the backseat.

"Do you want to go on a hike? I think we could both use that right now."

Emma nods, though she doesn't have the heart to smile.

Papa drives them out, and Emma recognizes this as the trail where she had her last hike with Mama. They get out of the car, and she notices Papa holding a sack. She doesn't ask questions as they begin their trek. Much like Emma's heart, the trail is quiet and sad, with the leaves rustling only when there's a small wind. Emma looks off to see another butterfly, but doesn't go after it.

Suddenly, Papa opens the sack and takes out something. He hands it to Emma who notices that it's a painted rock.

"What are we doing with these rocks, Papa?"

"I thought we could leave them for other hikers. I'm sure your Mama would love that."

By the time they're done, there are painted rocks all over the trail, every couple of feet.

"There," Papa said, "Now it'll be a mystery for everyone else on the trail. But we'll know. And Mama will know."

"How?"

"She's in Heaven watching over us, princess. You can feel her love in the trees here. And the wind. Just close your eyes and listen."

Emma obeys, and right at that moment, the wind picked up a tad, rustling the leaves in a familiar way. She smiles and starts to cry again. Papa crouches down and holds her close. And when the wind envelopes them, Emma feels warm arms around them both.